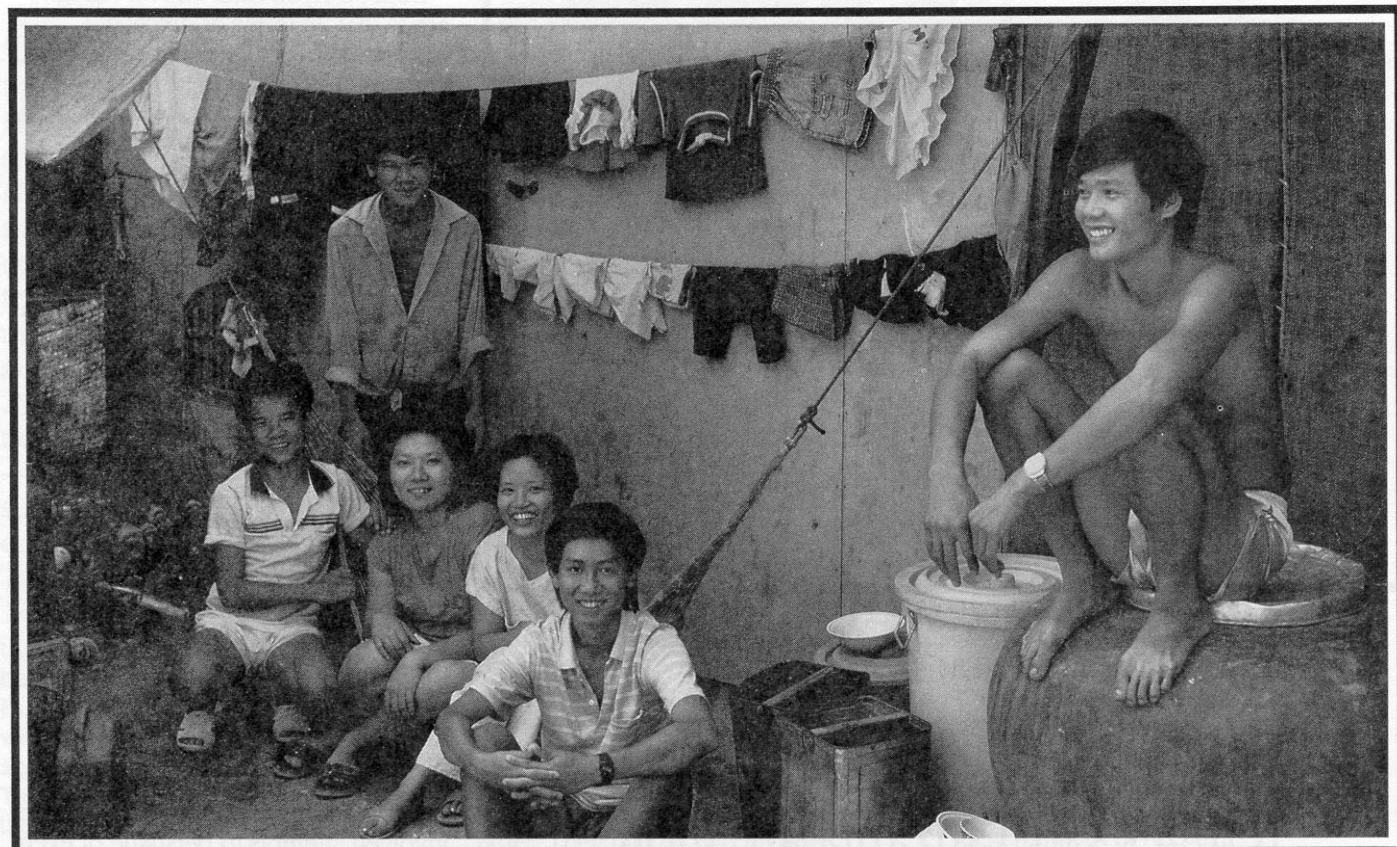




## REFUGEES WAITING IN EXPECTATION



*Vietnamese refugees waiting in a Thai camp for resettlement or repatriation: some have lived here for years.*

Thailand is currently faced with the daunting task of formulating a new policy for an old problem — refugees. Since 1945, refugees from Vietnam, China, Burma, Laos, and Cambodia have flooded into Thailand, most of them escaping the ravages of this war-torn region.

With more than 100,000 Indochinese refugees in the country today, the Thai government is walking a thin and difficult line between humanitarianism and pragmatic concern for national security.

Throughout the past 13 years, the Thai government has held an unchanging policy toward the refugee problem, allowing for the temporary stay of refugees to await third-country resettlement or repatriation. But both

resettlement and repatriation are complex processes that can take years. In the meantime, Thailand shoulders much of the political, economic, and social burden of refugees.

Thailand offers refuge to more than half of the 190,000 Indochinese migrants in the region. Many are fleeing from warfare and persecution and have little or no chance of being accepted in a third country. These refugees, more than 14,000 of whom are Vietnamese, are classified by the Thai government as "asylum seekers" because their well-being is threatened in their home country. They face the reality of going back to their country as one solution to the problem.

Those who have the prospect of being accepted for resettlement in a third country are referred to as "refugees." More than 75,000 of the migrants under this classification are Laotians and Cambodians. Both the Thai government and the United Nations High Commissioner for

Refugees (UNHCR) agree that the ideal solution to the current refugee problem is voluntary repatriation. Indeed, since 1980 some 7,364 Laotians have willingly returned to their country under UNCHR auspices.

At the international conference on Indochinese refugees held in Geneva in 1989, it was agreed that an additional 496 Laotians and 338 Vietnamese asylum seekers would voluntarily return home from Thailand. By getting most of the Indochinese countries together, this conference also tried to deal with the thorny issues at the root of the refugee situation: the persecution and human rights infringements of various minority groups in countries of origin.

In terms of the total number of refugees in camps in Thailand, those who actually do go back home are few and far between.

# REPORTS

One private organization, the Bangkok-based Public Affairs Institute, has been carrying out IDRC-funded policy research to aid the Thai government in its refugee strategy. The work of the Institute has been closely coordinated with the Interior Ministry, responsible for the overall refugee question, and the Supreme Command of the Thai Armed Forces.

"The priority that lies ahead for those looking after the Indochinese refugees is to prepare them to go back," says Professor Somsakdi Xuto, the Director of the Institute. "Our policies must begin to address this issue."

It has become almost impossible to convince refugees to return to their countries of origin, especially in light of the conditions in holding centres that are clearly better than those prevailing in home countries.

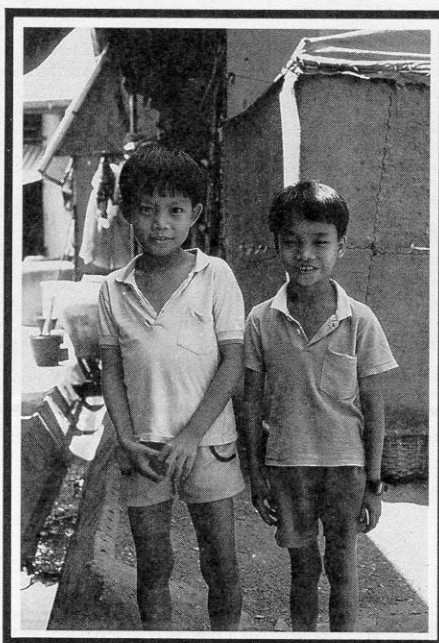
The 100,360 refugees and asylum seekers are housed in a number of camps, screening centres, and transit facilities assisted by the UNHCR. The size of these facilities range from the largest, at Ban Vinai camp in Loei province housing 23,820 Laotian hilltribe refugees, to fewer than 100 at the Bangkok Transit Centre. In addition to these refugees living within the country, there are 320,000 Cambodians living on the Thai-Cambodian border, north and south of the eastern Thai town of Anayapathet.

Professor Somsakdi notes that there is no easy way to categorize the refugees' responses to going back to their countries of origin. Although older refugees show willingness to return to their countries, the younger ones want exactly the opposite. With many younger refugees becoming familiar with the relatively high standard of living in Western countries where they seek resettlement, there is little inclination to return home.

This is a key problem for the refugee officials, UNHCR, and those involved in policy research. The bulk of the current refugee population is likely to stay in Thailand for longer periods of time because close to 80% of those living within holding centres are in their 20s.

Lowland Laotians are often sent to Thailand by their elders to seek resettlement in third countries, constituting groups of what are now considered "economic refugees." This influx exacerbates the problems of the current refugee situation.

It is for this reason that the Public Affairs Institute has worked with the Interior Ministry on the screening procedures for refugees at the camps. In particular, research workers from the Institute are helping with training



*Children make up a large percentage of refugees — what does the future hold for them?*

facilities for the screening process.

"Most Southeast Asian countries of first asylum have not had screening procedures to determine whether the entrants are refugees or not," Professor Somsakdi notes. He says the Public Affairs Institute is cooperating with the Thai government to make sure genuine refugees are given asylum while those seeking economic advantages are screened.

Perhaps the most pressing and typical example of Thai refugees is the one evidenced by the Hmong population coming mainly from Laos. Thai officials view them as a group with almost no chance of being

accepted by third countries for resettlement due largely to low levels of education. Most of the Hmong population are unwilling to return home because of persecution.

When the Hmong first arrived in Thailand they were determined to liberate their country from its communist rulers and return. But, gradually, they have become accustomed to the relatively comfortable conditions in camps. The will to fight and return home has virtually disappeared.

Thailand will likely have to cope with the refugee problem for a long time. Official policy denies the granting of Thai citizenship or permanent residence to refugees. Recently, Thailand did give citizenship to a group of Vietnamese who had fled to the country after the Dien Bien Phu fall of the French, but this gesture was seen as an exception rather than a rule in the case of the current "refugees" and "asylum seekers."

Professor Somsakdi does, however, remain optimistic in the face of recent developments. He believes that the refugee situation has improved in the last few years. "This part of the world is undergoing a big change now," he says. "And with the prospects for peace in Indochina growing strong, we can expect the refugee influx to slow down significantly."

Professor Somsakdi thinks the pressure on Thailand could ease off in the near future now that the country has stopped being the "magnet that earlier drew hundreds of thousands of Indochinese refugees."

*Wirasak Salayakanond in Thailand*



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